

The Mystery of the Empty Tomb



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By

Reverend J. Murtagh

Cover Art: *"Christ in the Sepulcher, Guarded by Angels,"* watercolor, pen, and ink in the Romantic style by William Blake, an English painter, engraver and poet (1757-1827). The painting was completed in 1809. It was donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London by the heirs of Esmond Morse. This picture of the original painting is in the Public Domain. *



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The death of Jesus Christ was surrounded with mystery stranger than the wildest fiction. Everybody saw the murder, but nobody could find the body.

From midnight on Maundy Thursday to dawn on Easter Sunday—little more than forty-eight hours—a tragedy, mounting in swift dramatic changes, swept to a climax that has made an ineffaceable mark on human history and forms the focal point of Christian faith and devotion.

All the historians agree that Jesus was arrested in a garden outside Jerusalem, called Gethsemane. If we could turn back the centuries, and arrive there at about 11 p.m. on the eve of the first Good Friday, we would see a small band of armed men, leading a strangely unresisting figure by torchlight through the darkness along the rocky ravine that leads up to the city and the court of the High Priest.

It would be approaching midnight on the eve of one of the most solemn of Jewish Festivals—the commemoration of the Passover. Let us consider events as we know they occurred.

The Trial

It was illegal to hold a trial at this hour, yet this trial was being held in defiance of the law. (Only actions involving money disputes could be conducted after sunset.) In this midnight court of Caiphas, the High Priest, the first clearly defined act, was the calling of witnesses. According to Jewish custom, the accusers in criminal proceedings were the witnesses. Hebrew jurisprudence, however, was singularly oriented in favor of the prisoner. If the evidence from the witnesses broke down, the prisoner was required to be acquitted and, if the evidence submitted was demonstrably false, the witness suffered the penalty of death by stoning. The charges brought against Jesus were that:

1. He had threatened to destroy the Temple.
2. He claimed to be the Son of God.
3. He had stirred up the people against Caesar.

Now the two remarkable things about the trial of Jesus were, first, that the evidence of the witnesses broke down and was rejected by the Court; second, that the Prisoner was condemned, not upon the statements of His accusers, but upon an admission extorted from Him under oath.

The whole case for the prosecution was on the point of collapse when the alert brain of Caiphas saved the situation. Although it was illegal for the judge to cross-examine the

prisoner, after the evidence of the witnesses had been rejected, Caiphas made a last desperate bid to save his plans from frustration. It was a race against time. Already the small hours of the Festival day were merging into dawn. The Nazarene had to be convicted on a capital charge and the execution and burial completed by sunset. For the morrow was the Sabbath day.

Therefore, Caiphas applied the Oath of Testimony. To this, a pious and law-abiding Jew had no alternative but to answer. According to the Mishna—the oral juridico-religious code of the Jews, “If one shall say, I adjure you, by the Almighty, by Sabaoth, by the Gracious and Merciful, by the long-suffering, by the Compassionate, or by any of the Divine titles, behold they are bound to answer.” Standing in the center of the tribunal, Caiphas administered this solemn oath to the Prisoner, asking Him whether He was the “Son of the Blessed God.”

With striking definiteness and emphasis, Jesus answered, “Yes, I am.” At a single stroke, Caiphas had achieved his purpose. He swung round upon the assembly and exclaimed, “He has blasphemed; what further need have we of witnesses?” Unfortunately, in the Jewish law, blasphemy meant death.

However, Rome had yet to give its ratification. Caesar reserved to himself the power over the lives of his subjects. The supreme penalty for crime against the Jewish law had to receive the approval of the Roman governor. At the time, the procurator of Judaea was one Pontius Pilate. A member of a fighting family, he had served for a time in the “Germanies.” While in Rome, he captured the affections of a Roman girl of high rank, Claudia Procula, illegitimate daughter of Claudia, third wife of Tiberias. His marriage to her served his own interests in an unexpected way, for in 26 A.D. he was appointed Procurator of Judaea, and by a special privilege was allowed to take his wife with him.

Pilate’s handling of the case of Jesus of Nazareth is strange and intriguing. In all his dealings with the Jews, in all his actions, he betrayed a certain timidity and indecision unusual in a Roman official. Certainly, while handling the case, he seemed to have one dominating idea—to get Christ acquitted at all costs. He attempted to shift the responsibility to Herod, he acclaimed the prisoner’s innocence three times, and he literally washed his hands of the whole affair. His last desperate effort was to offer Barabbas, a notorious Oriental gangster, as a sop to the clamoring mob. It was only when the disturbing cry, “You are no friend to Caesar,” was heard above the tumult that he finally broke down and gave the sanction of Imperial Rome to the execution of Christ.

Why the irresolution and hesitancy of this tough Roman soldier for whom life was cheap and the death of another Jew was little to worry about? When Claudia, his wife, awoke in her gilded boudoir on that fateful morning, she found Pilate already arisen and away on this business of the Nazarene Prisoner. She was sorely troubled and a prey to nerves.

She had had a dream, a disturbing dream, about Jesus of Nazareth. She called her maid and scribbled a note—almost telegraphic in its urgency—conveying her grave forebodings to her husband, “Do not meddle with this innocent man; I dreamed today that I suffered much on His account.” Was this the reason for Pilate’s vacillating uncertainty in his condemnation of Jesus?

The narrow stone-flagged streets of Jerusalem were crowded with the Pascal visitors when, bruised and bloodstained, Jesus emerged from the scourging ordered by Pilate and crowned with the thorns imposed in mockery by the Roman soldiers. The streets were still crowded when He began traveling the famous “Via Dolorosa” out through the city gate to the hill of Calvary. There, He was stripped, His hands and feet were nailed to a wooden cross, and He was crucified between the thieves. We have learned from ancient writers that the main agony of crucifixion was excruciating thirst. Yet, Jesus refused the sponge soaked in vinegar and gall that was offered to Him on the end of a lance. At three o’clock, He groaned aloud and breathed His last. A little later, to confirm death, a Roman officer thrust a spear into His side and blood, followed by water, flowed from His lifeless body.

Standing on the edge of the crowd, which was milling around the crest of Calvary, was a dignified figure silently watching the tragedy. His name was Joseph of Arimathea, a personage of social distinction and even of official status, for he was a member of the Sanhedrin. An admirer of the poor man of Nazareth he had courageously opposed His condemnation in the Supreme Council. We are told, “Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple of Jesus, but in secret, for fear of the Jews.” He slipped quietly from the crowd and made his way swiftly to the city, going up to Pilate’s palace. Determined to save the body of Jesus from a felon’s grave, he asked Pilate for the remains to give them honorable burial. Pilate verified the death by direct inquiry of the centurion and acceded to Joseph’s request. As the sun dipped low towards the western horizon, Joseph, accompanied by a city councilor, named Nicodemus, bore the body to his private garden not far from Calvary. Following at a short distance, stunned, grief-stricken, were the holy women companions of Jesus and his followers. They wrapped Jesus in a clean linen sheet and laid Him to rest in a cave tomb hewn out of solid rock. A great stone was rolled across the entrance and just before sunset, when the Sabbath began, the hasty burial was completed. Thus, Jesus, the poor man of Nazareth, lay entombed in a rich man’s sepulcher.

By all ordinary human standards, the story of Jesus Christ should have ended with His death and burial. With the beginning of the Sabbath at sunset on Friday, all further operations at the tomb were strictly forbidden by Jewish law. The Chief priest, however,

on the following day came to Pilate, requesting that a guard be set at the tomb for safety until the third day. Pilate abruptly told them to go and guard it themselves. A Temple guard was therefore stationed at the sepulcher and the stone sealed.

What happened in the forty hours between the burial on Friday and dawn on Sunday morning no man knows—except perhaps the guards.

Yet, one startling indisputable fact emerges. At dawn on Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, and the tomb was empty!

What happened to the body?

No one has ever denied the fact of the empty tomb. There is no hint of doubt in the literature of the times. Moreover, there is no trace in contemporary records of a tomb or shrine becoming the center of veneration or becoming the target of a pilgrimage because it contained the relics of Jesus. The empty tomb was common knowledge at the time to not only all Christians but also to Christian enemies.

To approach the problem scientifically, we must investigate all the physical and psychological elements of the situation.

Six independent lines of inquiry suggest themselves. That:

1. Jesus' life was not really extinguished and He revived in the cool of the tomb.
2. Joseph of Arimathea secretly removed the body to a more suitable resting-place.
3. The Apostles stole the Body.
4. The Body was removed by order of the Roman or Jewish authorities to prevent possible trouble.
5. The women who discovered the empty tomb mistook the grave in the early morning, or did not visit it at all and invented the whole story.

The first line of inquiry can be summarily dismissed. The idea that a man afflicted with frightful lacerations of hands and feet, and suffering from acute loss of blood could arise, move a heavy stone, and overpower the guards is too great a tax on human credulity.

As for Joseph of Arimathea, suggesting that the man who begged the Body from Pilate might have removed it seems more plausible. On closer examination, however, there appears no rational motive and, again, we are faced with Joseph's difficulty of evading the guards and the further problem that the new tomb would doubtless have become a shrine for the thousands of Christ's followers soon after the Sabbath was ended.

If we consider the Body was removed by the apostles, we have the same difficulty of the guards. In any case, it is psychologically untenable that the apostles could have carried out so daring a coup. They were beaten and disillusioned men. They utterly collapsed, fled, and hid after the arrest of Jesus. Of the two who stealthily followed the midnight trials, Peter cursed and swore that he did not know Him.

Did the Roman or Jewish authorities remove the body? Pilate's intervention can be safely dismissed. He was obviously glad to be rid of the problem. His curt refusal to the Jews to change the inscription written for the cross, and his blunt rebuff to the request for a Roman guard, betrayed a man in a dangerous and uncompromising mood. He was finished with the affair. The Jews sought permission from Pilate, not to remove the Body but to prevent It from being removed or stolen by sealing the stone and setting the guard.

The evidence of the women—Mary Magdalen, the Mother of James, and their companions—alone remains. Did they mistake the tomb? Did they actually visit it? Did they invent the story? The gospel historians tell us clearly that they saw the burial at Joseph's tomb. On Saturday, they prepared spices and ointments, after the custom of the East, to complete the funeral rites when the Sabbath was over. It was widely accepted in the East that decomposition set in on or about the third day after death. Naturally, the women would have preferred to carry out their ministrations on Saturday, but the Sabbath law forbade it. They were astir early, however, on Sunday morning. They set out from Jerusalem as the sun began to dawn. The sun seems to rise quickly in the East and it was doubtless several degrees in the sky as they neared their destination. On the way, we read, they discussed how they were going to have the stone removed. However, when they arrived at the tomb, they received a shock for which they were totally unprepared.

The stone was already rolled away. The guard was missing. The grave was empty. We must remember, the idea of a resurrection never crossed their minds. Mary Magdalene immediately rushed back to the disciples, Peter and John, who were in hiding. They breathlessly announced, "They have carried the Lord away from the tomb, and we cannot tell where they have taken Him." Were these the actions of, was this the language of, conspirators who were bent on concocting a gigantic falsehood?

How did the Body of Christ escape the grave?

Examination of all the suggested lines of inquiry seems to point to an alibi for all the possible suspects and we are still left with the problem of the empty tomb. The solution is startling and surprisingly simple. Yet, we leave it to you, the reader, with a query to help you on your way.

What happened to the guards?

The Gospel Story

Following are the Gospel narratives, according to Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as combined and harmonized by Archbishop Alban Goodier, S. J.

1. The Empty Tomb.

Matthew XXVIII, 1-7; Mark XVI, 1-7; Luke XXIV, 1-8; and John XX, 1. And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalen, and the other Mary, the mother of James and Salome brought sweet spices, that coming they might anoint Jesus. And on the first day of the week, very early in the morning when it was yet dark, they came to see the sepulcher, bringing the spices, which they had prepared. And the sun being now risen, they said one to another: Who shall roll us back the stone from the door of the sepulcher? And behold, there was a great earthquake, and looking, they saw the stone rolled back, taken away from the sepulcher. For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and coming, rolled back the stone, for it was very great, and the angel sat upon it. And His countenance was as lightning, and His raiment as snow, and for fear of Him the guards were struck with terror and became as dead men. And the angel answering said to the women: Fear not you; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He is risen as he said; come and see the place where the Lord was laid. And entering into the sepulcher, they found not the body of the Lord Jesus. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed with a white robe. And it came to pass as they were astonished in their own mind at this, behold two men stood by them in shining apparel. As they were afraid, and bowed down their countenance towards the ground, they said to them: Be not affrighted; why seek you the living with the dead: you seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified; He is not here but is risen; behold the place where they laid Him. Remember how He spoke unto you when He was yet in Galilee, saying: The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified.

2. The First Apparition.

Matthew XXVIII, 8-15; Mark XVI, 8; John XX, 2. But they, going quickly, fled from the sepulcher with fear and great joy, for a great trembling and fear had seized them. And they said nothing to any man, for they were afraid. (Mary Magdalen ran, therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved and saith to them: They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid Him.) And behold, Jesus met them, saying: All hail. But they came up, and took hold of His feet, and adored Him. Then Jesus said to them: Fear not. Go, tell my brethren, that they shall go into Galilee there they shall see me.

They had not finished their journey when some of the guards reached the city, and told the chief priests of all that befell. These priests gathered with the elders to take counsel, and offered a rich bribe to the soldiers. Let this, they said, be your tale, His disciples came by night and stole Him away, while we were asleep. If this should come to the ears of the governor, we will satisfy him, and see that no harm comes to you. The soldiers took the bribe, and did as they were instructed; and this is the tale that has gone abroad among the Jews, to this day.

3. The First Witness.

Luke XXIV, 9-11. And going back from the sepulcher, they told all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest. And it was Mary Magdalen, and Joanna, and Mary of James, and the other women that were with them who told these things to the apostles. And these words seemed to them as idle tales; and they did not believe them.

4. Peter and John.

Luke XXIV, 12; John XX, 3-10. But Peter rising up went and ran to the sepulcher, and that other disciple, and they came to the sepulcher. And they both ran together, and that other disciple did outrun Peter and came first to the sepulcher, and when he stooped down he saw the linen cloths lying, but yet he went not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths laid by themselves, and went into the sepulcher, and saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin that had been about His head not lying with the linen cloths, but apart, wrapped up into one place. Then that other disciple also went in, who came first to the sepulcher, and he saw and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. The disciples therefore departed again to their home.

5. Mary Magdalen.

Mark XVI, 9-11; John XX, 11-18. But He rising early the first day of the week appeared first to Mary Magdalen out of whom He had cast seven devils. Mary stood at the sepulcher without, weeping. Now as she was weeping, she stooped down and looked into the sepulcher; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been laid. They, say to her: Woman, why weepest thou? She saith to them: Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him. When she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing; and she knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith to her: Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She, thinking it was the gardener, saith to him: Sir, if thou has taken Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him and I will take Him away. Jesus saith to her:

Mary. She turning, saith to Him: Rabboni (which is to say, Master). Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalen cometh and telleth the disciples that had been with Him, who were mourning and weeping: I have seen the Lord and these things He said to me. And they, hearing that He was alive, and had been seen by her, did not believe.

6. The Disciples at Emmaus.

Mark XVI, 12, 13; Luke XXIV, 13-25. And behold after that He appeared in another shape to two of them walking that day as they were going into the country to a town which was sixty furlongs from Jerusalem, named Emmaus; and they talked together of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass that, while they talked and reasoned with themselves, Jesus also drawing near went with them; but their eyes were held that they should not know Him. And he said to them: What are these discourses that you hold with one another as you walk and are sad? And the one of them whose name was Cleophas, answering, said to Him: Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things that have been done there in these days? To whom He said: What things? And they said: Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in work and word before God and all the people; and how our chief priests and princes delivered Him to be condemned to death and crucified Him. But we hoped that it was He that should have redeemed Israel. And now besides all this, today is the third day since all these things were done; yea, and certain women also of our company affrighted us who, before it was light, were at the sepulcher, and not finding His body came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who say that He is alive. And some of our people went to the sepulcher, and found it so as the women said; but Him they found not. Then He said to them: O foolish and slow of heart to believe in all the things which the prophets have spoken. Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things that were concerning Him. And they drew nigh to the town whither they were going, and He made as though He would go farther. But they constrained Him, saying: Stay with us, because it is towards evening, and the day is now far spent. And He went in with them; and it came to pass, while He was at table with them, He took bread, and blessed, and broke, and gave to them, and their eyes were opened, and they knew Him, and He vanished out of their sight. And they said to one another: Was not our heart burning within us whilst He spoke in the way, and opened to us the scriptures? And rising up the same hour, they went back to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven gathered together,

and those that were with them saying: The Lord has risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done on the way and how they knew Him in the breaking of bread. And they, going, told it to the rest; neither did they believe them.

7. First Appearance to the Apostles.

Mark XVI, 14; Luke XXIV 36-43; John XX, 19-23. Now when it was late that same day the first of the week, and the doors were shut where the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews, whilst they were speaking these things, at length Jesus appeared to the eleven as they were at table, and came and stood in the midst of them. And He upbraided them with their incredulity and hardness of heart, because they would not believe them who had seen Him after He was risen again. And He said to them: Peace be to you; it is I, fear not. But they being troubled and frightened, supposed that they saw a spirit. And He said to them: Why are you troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? See my hands and feet, that it is I, myself. Handle, and see: for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as you see me to have. And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and feet, and His side. But while they yet believed not and wondered for joy, He said: Have you here anything to eat? And they offered Him a piece of broiled fish and a honeycomb. And when He had eaten before them, taking the remains He gave to them. The disciples therefore were glad when they saw the Lord. He said therefore to them again: Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When He had said this, He breathed on them. And He said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.

8. The Apparition to Thomas.

John XX, 24-29. Now Thomas, one of the twelve, who is called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to Him: We have seen the Lord. But He said to them: Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe. And after eight days again His disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said: Peace be to you. Then He saith to Thomas: Put in thy finger hither, and see my hands; and bring hither thy hand, and put it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing. Thomas answered and said to Him: My Lord and my God. Jesus saith to him: Because thou has seen me, Thomas, thou has believed: Blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed.

The Gospels also record appearances of the risen Jesus by the sea of Tiberias (John XXI, 1-24) on the Mount of Galilee (Matthew XXVIII, 16-20; Mark XVI, 15-18) and at the Ascension (Mark XVI, 19-20; Luke, XXIV, 44-53).

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"The Resurrection - Angels Rolling the Stone from the Sepulcher," another watercolor, pen, and ink painting completed in 1808 by William Blake. It was donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, by the heirs of Sydney and Esmond Morse, but is not currently on display. The painting is in the Public Domain and the citation on the title page of this booklet specifies the justification.

On-line commentary by Elizabeth Fletcher points out that we are inside the tomb with Jesus as life returns to His body, which is an unusual view as artists usually present the Risen Christ from outside the tomb. In this version, two angels guard Him while a third steps forward to open the door of the tomb. The stone has been rolled away and the viewer sees past the angel into the chilly outside world, which is in darkness, waiting for Christ's light.



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